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Cover: Rigolet. Courtesy Bird's Eye Inc.



EXPLORING THE LEGEND OF *Sedna*

BY DALE JARVIS

Once upon a time when the world was still new, humans and dogs were created to populate the land. Together they spread out across the north.

One woman, the daughter of a hunter, spurned the advances of the men who came courting her. Instead, she married a dog.

Her father was ashamed of her and put her in his umiak, an open skin boat. When they got far out to sea he threw her overboard, planning to be rid of her once and for all. The daughter seized hold of the boat, hoping to save herself. Angered at this, the father cut off her fingers with his knife.

The woman, known as Sedna, sank to the bottom of the ocean. But she did not die, and instead became the spirit of the sea, providing life to all sea animals. Her thumb became the walrus, her first finger the seal, and her middle finger the polar bear.

She lives there to this day, in a sod house at the ocean's bottom.

FROM ALASKA TO GREENLAND, indigenous storytellers have been recounting the exploits of Sedna for countless generations, and she is known by dozens of names. The Netsilik Inuit call her Nuliajuk, while in Iglulik she is known as Aiviliajoq - "She who gives useful things." On Baffin Island she is known as Uinigumissuitung - "She who never wished to marry" while in Greenland she is known as Saittuma Uva - "Spirit of the sea depths" or Arnarkuagssak - "The Very Old Woman."

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Sometimes she appears with a jacket hood always worn up, sometimes with only one eye or one pigtail. Sometimes she has no fingers, or is unable to walk; other times she is as tall as a giant, or takes on the look of an old hag. In some versions she marries a man who is able to transform into a crow or a fulmar, and her watery home is made of whale bones. In some stories, missing her fingers, she is unable to comb and braid her long hair, and her anger whips up the storms that plague hunters on the surface of the sea. She is sometimes depicted as half-woman, half-sea animal.

Her story exists in a bewildering number of versions, but the tale that starts this article is one that was collected from the very northernmost part of Labrador over a century ago.

In 1914, American anthropologist Ernest William Hawkes travelled to the coast of Labrador for the Geological Survey of Canada. He spent the early part of summer in Sandwich Bay and Hamilton Inlet, in an endeavour to map out the southern limit of the Labrador Inuit. He spent the remainder of the summer and autumn with the Carnegie Magnetic Expedition, continuing up the coast as far as Cape

Chidley at the northern tip of Labrador. It was there he encountered stories of the goddess whom the people of Killiniq referred to as “Old-woman-who-lived-in-the-sea.”

At Killiniq, the goddess took the form of an old woman whose home was at the bottom of the ocean. Occasionally, she would come up to breathe, usually across the strait near the shores of Tutjarluk (Resolution Island) off the southern tip of Baffin Island.

Hawkes wrote in his report for the Geological Survey of Canada that Old-woman-who-lived-in-the-sea “controls everything that swims in the sea; the fish, the seals, and especially the polar bear. She must be appeased, else she would drive the polar bears northward to Tutjarluk where there are no hunters, or she might send a shark to eat their seals and cut up their nets, or make the codfish refuse to bite.”

According to Hawkes, the Killiniq people did their best to keep Old-woman-who-lived-in-the-sea happy, throwing their broken knives, worn-out harpoon-heads, and pieces of meat and bone into the water as offerings.

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ment at Killiniq, and no one to appease Old-woman-who-lived-in-the-sea. But her stories live on, farther south along the Nunatsiavut coast.

Not far from Makkovik, Kaipokok Bay runs inland between forested hills. The Hudson Bay Company established a trading post in the area, and it was a spot where Inuit traded furs in the fall, winter and spring. First known as “The Post,” it was renamed Postville in the 1940s by a pastor who established a school and a church in the area. The community has its own stories of the woman at the bottom of the sea.

Ruth Jacque is the Community Economic Development and Tourism Officer with the Postville Inuit Community Government. Recently, she has been working on local projects to share traditional knowledge and oral history. Earlier in her career, she worked as a teacher.

“I’m retired five years now,” she tells me. “For part of my career I taught junior high English. I created my own Inuit unit; I put together some

Inuit legends, and I included Sedna because that is the one that is most known around here.”

Ruth used the story of Sedna to introduce her students to elements of literature like simile and metaphor, and to compare and contrast legends, fairy tales and creation stories from different cultures.

I asked Ruth to tell me her version of Sedna’s story.



‘Sedna’s Ride’ by artist Craig Paul depicts Sedna’s power over the oceans through her command of its creatures, in this case a dolphin.

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"Sedna was married off, and the man she was married to could turn into a bird," she tells me. "He didn't treat her well, and she tried to leave home. Her father was bringing her back, and she either jumped overboard or he pushed her overboard."

"When she was trying to get back in the boat, he cut off her fingers. Those fingers turned into the fish. He cut off her hands, and they turned into the seals. He cut off her arms and they turned into the whales. Now, she is the queen of the sea creatures."

"They were shocked at the violence of it, her father cutting off her fingers," she adds. "It is a scary, monster-story creation story. It's not a happy creation story!"

For many of the Postville students, learning the story of Sedna in Ruth's English class was the first time they had heard of the goddess. Many of them were surprised at some of the more gruesome details of the tale.

"They were shocked at the violence of it, her father cutting off her fingers," she adds. "It is a scary, monster-story creation story. It's not a happy

creation story! The students were used to creation stories being loving stories, and to see this violent creation myth was shocking to them."

Ruth worries that in Postville, there has not been much carry-over of some aspects of traditional knowledge, such as the old Inuit legends.

"Those kinds of stories haven't really been passed down," she says. "But it's very important, because those stories make us who we are."

While some of the Postville kids were unaware of Sedna, her story continues to have an impact

on the cultural life of Labrador.

"Several of the communities, even our community, had drum dancing as part of the life skills class for the kids," Ruth adds. "One of the

schools I went to, they did the story of Sedna in the drum dance. With the drum dancing, it is the kind of story that you can act out. I think the violence is part of the attraction!"

The drama inherent in the Sedna story has given inspiration to generations of Labrador artists. Sedna in her various forms has appeared in everything from drum dancing to drama,



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and from visual art to sculpture. Labrador artists continue to be inspired by the myth of Sedna, which allows them to explore the human world's relationship with animals and nature, and speak to the strength of women in Inuit communities.

In 1987, the OKâlaKatigêt Society reported on a play called "Shaman: The New Dawn" written and performed by Hopedale's Nalujuk Players, and directed by Bill Wheaton at the Amos Comenius Memorial School. The production was based on information they collected from the

people of Hopedale, and on their own ideas. In the show, Diana Landry played the sea goddess. David Nochasak and Julius Jararuse portrayed shamans. Philip Hunter was, appropriately, the Hunter. May Flowers played the hunter's daughter and a fish, while behind the scenes, Julius Basto and Wilson Onalik were responsible for the lighting effects. Rubina Pijogge produced the sound effects, matching the sounds to the mood of each scene.

Craig Paul, an indigenous soapstone and antler carver born in Port Hope

'Sedna and Friend' by artist Craig Paul

Birches Gallery photo



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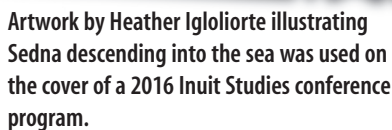



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As Ruth says, it is our stories that make us who we are. 

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